Student Voice
Student engagement tips from students

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Introduction

Students are the end users of educational products. Be it curriculum, text books or even classroom strategies; students are the recipients of those products and that makes them major stakeholders in the education system.

As stakeholders we thought they should have a say in how they wanted to be engaged in learning.

This paper was created in collaboration with 150 students from 6 separate high schools using Thoughtexchange.

Student Engagement Today

 "Focusing first on increasing student engagement, rather than on improving test scores, can actually foster greater gains in students' academic, emotional, social, and behavioral achievement (Klem & Connell, 2005)"

Decades of research have shown how powerful and effective student engagement can be in nurturing the intellectual and emotional development of students:

"High student engagement has been consistently linked to student academic success in a number of ways" (Blank, 1997; Dev, 1997; Kushman, 2000; Woods, 1995)

 "Student engagement boosts the acquisition of knowledge and the development of problem-solving skills" (Johnson, Johnson, & Smith, 1998)

 "Student engagement helps with the development of critical thinking skills" (Pascarella et al., 2001)

While the importance of student engagement has not changed over the years, the typical student has. This means that the most effective approaches for engaging students today may have changed.

What is the typical student like today?

Nearly 90% of teens aged 14-17 have a cell phone, while just under 60% of 12- to 13-year-olds have a cell phone

13 - 17 year olds exchange 3417 texts a month, on average. This number has been rapidly on the rise over the last few years

Kids aged 2 to 12 years spend more than 25% of their leisure time doing two or more activities at the same time, including reading, listening to music, watching TV and using the computer

95 percent of teens aged 12-17 are online, and about 80 percent of those online are users of social media sites

Roughly half of teens aged 13-17 spend over 30+ hours a week engaging online and across multiple channels

Statistics above retrieved from Media Literacy Clearinghouse.

These changes mean a number of things including new expectations, new kinds of distractions, and new media for communication with and between students.

Given these changes, how can educators most effectively engage today's students?

We asked the experts… students.

"Thought Cloud" of students' top prioritized responses to what would improve their experience at school.

Interactivity and Hands-on Learning

Students said …

Students prioritized more interactive and "engaging activities in the classroom". They identified discussions, debates and presentations as the best way to improve their learning experience …

"We need to have more activities and social group work. Discussions help people feel more comfortable and more ideas surface that way. We also need more moving and less just sitting in a desk, more field trips and experiments."

"Individual studies work for a time, but interaction between students and the teacher (via discussions, activities, etc.) can solidify knowledge and help promote equal learning."

"I know myself, and most others, are most engaged during a 'two way' style learning. Mild competition also encourages people (myself included) to be more engaged."

"If students get the chance to see what they learn first hand, it can help reassure what they have just learned. These demonstrations can be group activities, movies, interactive games, or projects."

"Interactive discussion work much more effectively and spark interest in the students. New teaching media is available and is very effective."

"Lectures are outdated and do not teach the content as well as other techniques. The same can be said when talking about notes."

The hands-on activities students requested most were ones that would facilitate collaborative learning and would allow them to teach one another …

"Talk about the subject, instead of having self assignments on it have a group discussion so everyone understands."

"I think a student who didn't understand a subject could possibly gain an understanding if they heard it repeated by their friends. Also, giving their opinion on the subject would show understanding."

"I hate sitting and listening to a teacher drone on about a topic. It is so much better if I have to go out and find out about a topic myself. It is also great when I am able to discuss it with my peers and even teach it to them. That is honestly the best way to learn something: to teach it to someone else."

Choice

Students said …

In addition to preferring collaborative and interactive learning experiences students indicated they also wanted more say regarding both content and teaching methods

 "Lots of teachers never really take interest in what kids want to talk about, so if they try and talk more about what kids want then things might be more interesting."

 "Try to ask the students once in a while if they have clubs or projects they would like to take on around the school, include more modern ideas and make sure they are fun so kids enjoy them!"

Their suggestions for teachers:

 "listens to the students and add their input to the class"

 "asks what they would like to learn about so everybody's interested"

 "includes students interests in their assignments"

 "finds out the best way they learn and teach that way"

 "asks them for ideas on how to make the class better for them"

Flexibility

… Students said

Homework was often mentioned as a major cause of stress. A suggestion that was voiced repeatedly was to bring more work into the classroom or to introduce times during school hours when students could do work alone or in a small group

"Homework is always a stress when at home. An assignment should be placed in class and be expected to be finished in class. If it is not finished the student will have to do it at home if not then it is their own fault the work isn't done. It would add less stress at home and make school more enjoyable."

"Free blocks we could study, have time to do more work and when we can help other students in that class if they needed us."

"Because we have after school jobs because we want money to get extra things and pay for schooling but sometimes we do not have enough time to do homework so if you made homework not for marks then if we did not do it we would only be hurting ourselves but our grade would not be affected because we did not have enough time to do homework."

"It would be reasonable to have not such a work load but more of in class assignments."

Relevance

Students said …

In addition to wanting input into the topics they learn about, students voiced a desire to have a deeper understanding of the value, relevance and potential applications of the subjects they were learning about in class.

"I want more subjects in my classes made more useful and interesting, and about stuff we do need for the future, not something to just pass the year."

"In courses like math it doesn't seem like I will ever need to use some of the stuff they are teaching us and stuff like socials they need to keep the history but as well add more current events and newer things that are resourceful for us."

"We need to have more inspiration to do well in our classes. If I was shown the importance of Math and English earlier I would have definitely tried harder."
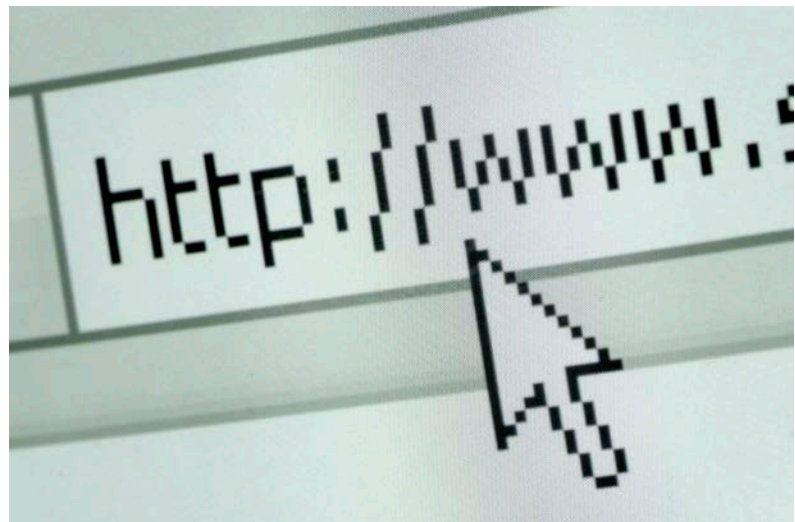
Technology

... Students said

Students said they would like teachers to utilize relevant technology for teaching and to keep in touch with and students.

"The world around us has evolved to work around technology and work with it. We use it constantly to communicate. Is learning and teaching a method of communication? Passing knowledge from one brain to the next is the oldest way of learning, aside from doing it yourself."

"As our world evolves and rapidly turns to it's dependency on technology, our schools have stayed the same. This is not right...We need to know what we are going into, a world full of technology and exciting new endeavors that we can engage with, if only we knew how. Using technology is a smart and sensible way to bring us into the "real world" with a breath of expectancy of what to see and excitement of what to come."

" Take advantage of recent technology such as Youtube. I think that students learn better visually. If the teacher showed a video or powerpoint demonstrating the subject they are learning, I think it would be easier to understand and also interest the students."

"...since almost every high school student has either a computer or a cellphone, I think that more technology should be used to make communication between teachers and students easier."

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Variety

Students said …

After homework, one of the top complaints from students was about having to sit too much.

"I think we need more breaks because we sit for too long and we should get active more and not sitting all day"

"It has been proven many times over that movement stimulates the brain. We sit too much. It's monotonous."

"Just sitting there...We need to have more interactive things like more labs and things like that"

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Teaching strategies

… Students said

Many students voiced their desire for teachers to try new teaching strategies and expose students to new learning experiences via diversified electives, changed settings and class trips.
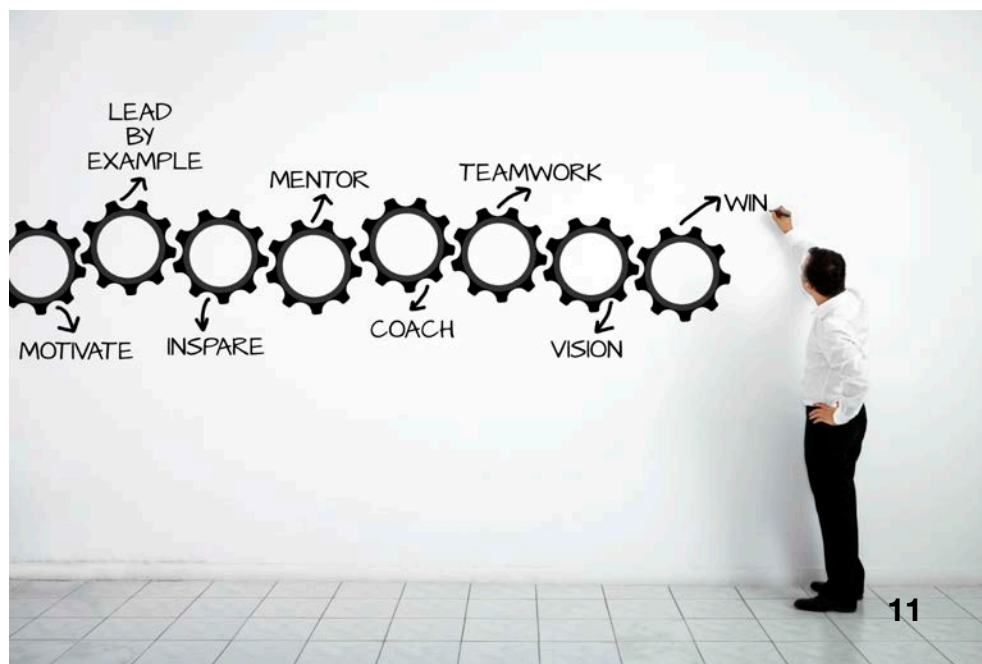
"Being able to go somewhere where they actually do the things we learn about, - ie: TRIUMPH center at UBC, or Chemistry Lab- would keep me way more interested"

"They should explain things different ways because some kids understand it when it is taught in a different way"

"There will never be a perfect way of teaching every student. There are different ways of learning and different subject areas that all students will have different opinions on. The best we can do is to vary the way we are educated in order to offer areas that will connect with at least a few students at all times. Education is a beautiful thing; they say: knowledge is power. Experience allows us the greatest amount of growth. The greater the number of varied experiences, the more we will grow."

"Allow the students to have some say in what they find interesting and what they like doing, maybe go on more field trips, and have classes outside sometimes"

Respect, safety and caring

Students said …

Students want their teachers to respect them and create a comfortable environment where they can feel safe asking questions.

"There should be acceptance of putting yourself out there, and allowing yourself to be vulnerable in order to increase your growth and knowledge."

"Offer MORE help because some students are scared to ask for help or even maybe embarrassed because of the other students."

"Be honest, have emotions (to a certain degree), introduce myself properly to my students. It's much easier to learn from someone you have a connection to than just some other adult. Especially in high school, you have yet to realize your teachers are human, but when you do, it's shocking and quite wonderful"

"As a high school student, I am more likely to act mature if I am treated like an intelligent 'young adult'; having to ask to go to the bathroom, give a teacher (and inform the office) a note for every absence and other such protocols are annoying and in a way, degrading... Flexibility would be nice."

"Teachers who don't stigmatize and care about all students doing well. The kids who, at younger ages, were not regarded as being those "Top Students" may feel restricted by their social status, or generalized "level of intelligence." For all students, these stereotypes are capable of decreasing a student's feelings of competency (self-worth, self-confidence) whether because of their decreasing levels of "achievement" or their discovery of an intriguing topic or subject area in which they discover they would like to excel."

![thoughtexchange logo]

Connection and passion

... Students said

"...I often find myself wondering what I could do to improve. Maybe once a month a student and a teacher could meet, much like parent teacher interview for students, for the parents cannot heed the ad-vice for the students"

"Teachers that have some lee way and care about the students, not just in it for the pay check."

"Teachers to care if kids are doing bad and really want their students to succeed."

Students want their teachers to be passionate and excited about the material... and the students.

"The classes would be much more exiting with teachers who joke but just as well teach the work and not force it upon us."

"Enjoy teaching and create a fun learning environment!!!"

"Teachers that care about the subject they are teaching, and can control a class and gain respect from the students."

Insights

A common theme that emerged through the engagement process was a desire to be genuinely understood, respected and trusted by their teachers. Students want to be engaged in learning and have very clear ideas about how best to engage them. Asking students for their thoughts is a great step towards better student engagement while demonstrating a genuine intent to treat them like the stakeholders.

To help act on student's suggestions we will leave you with a few more questions that might be worth asking your students:

What are some key things you would like to learn about in this class?

What are some ways you would ideally like to apply lessons from this class to your everyday life or your future?

What kinds of in-class activities have you found to be most effective for learning about topics in <subject area>?

What do you think would be the best way to make sure you are understanding the material covered in this class?

What are some services, tactics or ideas we can use to allow and encourage students to help each other with school work?

What would be the best way for me to communicate with you and help you outside of class?

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Thoughtexchange is used by school districts across North America to connect people, information and processes in one experience. It's where engaged participants can exchange thoughts and ideas, and work together to reach shared goals. The process was developed to address a lack of engagement and participation that plagues more traditional forums, like focus groups and surveys. With Thoughtexchange, stakeholders are onboard faster and find the process easy and flexible to use. As a result, you get insights from a broader spectrum, allowing you to move forward with confidence.

Get in touch today

I believe school communities are starving for this kind of input, and I couldn't be happier that we chose to go with Thoughtexchange to engage our parents."

Cam McKeage
Associate Superintendent
Prairie Land Regional Division